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TAGS: PREL KPAL IS FR

SUBJECT: ARAFAT IN CONTINUED, POSSIBLY IRREVERSIBLE COMA

REF: A. JERUSALEM 4161 AND PREVIOUS

1B. PARIS 7985
1C. PARIS 7930

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt,
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: As of 1030 local (0430 EST) November 5, MFA officials described Arafat as in a continued coma, with uncertainty whether his condition is irreversible or what permanent damage he might suffer if he regains consciousness. There is still no diagnosis on the cause of his condition. In successive discussions with us late November 4, senior MFA and Elysee officials described Arafat as unconscious or semi-conscious for undetermined causes since November 3, but not on the brink of death. President Chirac, just prior to departing for the European Council in Brussels, briefly visited Arafat mid-afternoon November 4, and the Palestinian leader reportedly responded with a "twitch and a smile" to Chirac's presence. Chirac's Middle East advisor described Arafat as at "3 or 4" on a medical coma scale between 1 and 15. Results of toxicology tests should be complete by November 5, though French officials caution that French law prevents Arafat's doctors from releasing medical information without Suha Arafat's permission. Suha Arafat has sought to keep a tight lid on public disclosures, and initially resisted public clarification November 4 that Arafat was not/not dead. FM Barnier's Cabinet Director told us November 4 he saw three options before the GoF: 1) the GoF flies Arafat to Gaza before he dies, 2) Arafat recovers, and 3) Arafat dies in France, at which the GoF would have a small ceremony at the hospital before flying the body immediately back to Gaza. End summary.

NOVEMBER 5 UPDATE

12. (U) The French daily "Le Figaro" reported November 5 that Arafat is brain dead, in an irreversible coma and on life support, citing an unnamed French doctor treating Arafat. Paris PLO representative Leila Shahid publicly denied the "brain death" stories early November 5, and, while confirming for the first time that Arafat was in a coma, described it as "reversible."

13. (C) MFA DAS-equivalent for Israeli/Palestinian/Levant Affairs Christian Jouret told poloff at 1030 local November 5 that Arafat remained in very bad condition and a continued coma. He stressed, though, that it was unclear whether Arafat's condition was reversible, and what degree of permanent neurological damage he might suffer if he did regain consciousness. (Late November 4, Jouret told us doctors' reports had confirmed that Arafat would suffer permanent neurological damage if he recovered.) Asked to confirm press reports of negotiations ongoing between France, Egypt and Israel over where Arafat should be buried, Jouret said he was unaware of GoF involvement in such talks but did not exclude that such discussions might already be underway between the Israelis and Palestinians. Jouret added that the GoF would be prepared to act quickly if asked by Arafat's entourage to transport the leader outside France, but he underlined that no such request had been made and that GoF action would be unlikely with both Chirac and FM Barnier out of the country today. (Chirac is in Brussels and heads to

Abu Dhabi for Shaykh Zayed funeral November 5, while Barnier fills in for Chirac at EU Council lunch with Iraqi PM Allawi and meets with Iraqi FM Zebari in Brussels today as well.)

CHIRAC-ARAFAT VISIT NOVEMBER 4

¶ 14. (C) Between 1700 and 1800 local time (1100 and 1200 EST) November 4, we received a series of updates from senior MFA and Elysee officials on Arafat's health condition, amid conflicting press reports, including a false rumor that Arafat had died which was later publicly refuted by the French military hospital staff. In the first update, at 1705 local, MFA Cabinet Advisor Pierre Vimont confirmed to DCM that Arafat has been unconscious for past 24 hours, and doctors could not explain the cause for the sudden deterioration. Before departing Paris for Brussels for the European Council, Chirac had visited Arafat briefly at around 1515 local, and spoke mainly to Suha Arafat. Vimont reported that when Chirac put his hand on Arafat's arm, Arafat responded with a "twitch and a smile," which Vimont said was likely a reflex. MFA DAS-equivalent for Israel/Palestinian/Levant issues Christian Jouret later told poloff that Chirac had entered the room and greeted Arafat by saying, "Hello, Dr. Chirac is in." He too reported that doctors were unsure whether Arafat's response was a reflex or not, and described Arafat in "some kind of coma."

¶ 15. (C) Elysee Middle East Advisor Andre Parant, who accompanied Chirac on the Arafat hospital visit offered a slightly more positive description of the PA chairman than his MFA counterparts. Parant described Arafat as "semi-conscious," open eyed during the Chirac visit, and in very bad condition, but "not dead yet." Parant added that on a medical scale of 1 to 15, with 15 being a full coma, doctors had described Arafat as a "3 or 4." The main cause of concern for doctors was that they did not know the cause of Arafat's deterioration. Certain tests to facilitate a diagnosis were still not possible, for example, due to a blood coagulation problem. Parant also confirmed press reports that Arafat was on a ventilator, but described this as routine for patients in his condition.

TOXICOLOGY TESTS, POISONING RUMORS

¶ 16. (C) Parant confirmed that toxicology tests had been completed and results should be available by late November 4 or 5. Acknowledging the potential dangers of continued rumors of an Arafat poisoning, Parant cautioned that negative test results might not dampen irrational belief among some Palestinians that Arafat had been poisoned. Poloff stressed the need for the GoF to help quash such rumors once test results were complete, given the potential for violence to ensue over accusations of Israeli complicity in Arafat's illness. Parant expressed sympathy, but made no promises. He stressed that, under French law, Arafat's French (and MOD employee) doctors could not release any public information about his condition without the consent of his family, namely Suha Arafat. The problem, according to Parant, was Suha did not want to release any information about Arafat's condition, and was reluctant even to approve the French doctors' November 4 announcement that Arafat was not/not dead, though she finally relented and allowed the announcement to go forward. According to Parant, Suha had threatened to sue the French doctors treating Arafat if they released to the public any medical information on Arafat without her consent. Parant concluded that, if Suha agreed to release the toxicology reports, there would be no problem. If, however, she found the results inconclusive or sought to prevent a public announcement of the results, that was her prerogative.

NEXT STEPS?

¶ 17. (C) Of our GoF interlocutors, only Barnier Cabinet

Director Vimont was forthcoming on discussing potential next steps in detail, during his November 4 conversation with DCM.

Vimont said he saw three potential scenarios: 1) the GoF flies Arafat to Gaza soon so he dies in Gaza, 2) Arafat recovers, and 3) Arafat dies in France, at which the GoF would need to have a "little ceremony" at the hospital, and then fly him right away to Gaza. One complication, remained that if Arafat died in France, GoF law requires autopsy in cases where death is due to unknown causes. Vimont suggested that GoF was assuming that Arafat's family wanted burial to take place in Gaza and that burial would need to take place quickly; it was not clear if the GoF had consulted with Suha on this. Vimont did not see a Jerusalem burial as an option.

¶18. (C) Vimont added that he saw three groups of Palestinians gathered in Paris: 1) a small group at hospital, 2) those trying to get in to hospital, and 3) a group staying at Intercontinental hotel, who are leaking the dire health information to the press.

COMMENT

¶19. (C) Comment: With the tight public information lock-down on Arafat's health being maintained by Suha Arafat, and the GoF keeping its own information limited to the highest levels (Jouret, for example, told us the MFA learned of Chirac's visit to Arafat via French TV), we expect the current flow of conflicting reports and misinformation (especially from the Arafat entourage) to continue unabated. Given the reluctance of Suha Arafat and Leila Shahid to confirm known details of Arafat's deterioration, it is entirely likely that public announcement of Arafat's death, when and if that occurs, may be delayed by the Palestinian hospital entourage. At the same time, with the French president and FM out of the country November 5, we do not think French officials see Arafat as literally on the brink of death, although it appears his condition is indeed very, very bad. End comment.

Leach